

Crucibles of leadership

By Warren G Bennis and Robert J Thomas, HBR September, 2002

Why do certain people seem to naturally inspire confidence, loyalty and hard work from the team members while others miserably fail to do so? The authors argue that it has something to do with the way people deal with adversity. Indeed, a very reliable indicator of true leadership is an individual's ability to learn from and find meaning in adverse situations.

Like phoenixes rising from the ashes, extraordinary leaders emerge from adversity, stronger, more confident in themselves and in their purpose and more committed to their work. Such transformative events are called crucibles and are intense, traumatic and always unplanned.

Some crucibles illuminate a hidden, suppressed area of the soul. These are often the harshest of crucibles. The article refers to a leader being kept in solitary confinement in prison for many years on false charges.

Some crucibles are violent and life threatening, such as a major illness. Others are more positive, yet profoundly challenging, such as a demanding boss.

The experience of prejudice is another example of a crucible. Being a victim of prejudice forces an individual to confront a distorted picture of herself and often unleashes feelings of anger, bewilderment and even withdrawal. But the experience of prejudice is also a clarifying event. It helps leaders gain a clearer vision of who they are, the role they play and their place on the world.

Crucibles force leaders into deep self-reflection, where they examine their values, question their assumptions and hone their judgment. Whatever be the shape of the crisis, leaders create a narrative telling how they met the challenge and became better for it.

Four skills enable leaders to learn from adversity.

- They engage others in shared meaning.
- They have a distinctive compelling voice that helps them to reframe the situation and has a calming influence.
- They have integrity, i.e. strong values.
- They have adaptive capacity which is composed of two qualities- the ability to grasp the context, i.e. put things in perspective and hardiness, i.e. perseverance and toughness.